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Article title: Child participation in research: Children as research advisors

Year of publication: 2004

Citation: Doná, G. (2004) 'Child participation in research: Children as research advisors.' *Post Grad Refugee Research Quarterly*, Autumn, 5-6

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Child participation in research: Children as research advisors

“N’izibika zari amagi” “Even the rooster once was an egg”

This Rwandan saying was told by a child in a group session to indicate that adults tend to forget that who they are and what they know develops from their past, and that knowledge and expertise are to be found in childhood. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child supports the view that children are independent human beings and that they are entitled to participate in activities (including research) that affect their lives. In research, child participation usually refers to positioning children not simply as objects or subjects but as social actors and more recently as participants and co-researchers¹. This short piece of writing is a reflection on the methodology adopted in two research projects with separated children, one with Rwandan fostered children and the other with Bangladeshi children in institutions and communities. Working under the assumptions that children know best, we invited a group of children to participate in our research as *research advisors*, to counsel on the planning and implement of the projects.

In Rwanda, children attending a day centre nominated their representatives, children with backgrounds similar to those of fostered children, to participate in the project. Twelve children met with the researchers every two weeks for the duration of the study. These regular reunions became a short Research Methods training for the children. Topics covered included: what is research, what do we want to know about fostered children (research topics), whom to ask (participants’ selection), how to approach children and adults (procedure), and how to make sense of unclear findings (discussion). As we engaged with the broader study on the lives of Rwandan fostered children², the advisors’ comments were used to revise and improve our methodology. Some examples of the suggestions we adopted are:

1. What needs to be known is how foster children are treated, do they go to school, do they receive the same amount of food as the other children, are they at ease, and do foster parents treat them as their own?
2. In order to obtain good information, not only fostered children and parents should be interviewed but others too. Ranked according to the type of information they can provide, they are in decreasing order of trustworthiness: peers of foster children, foster parents, friends of foster

¹ Christensen, P. and Prout, A. (2002), Working with ethic symmetry in social research with children, *Childhood*, 9(4), 477-497.

² Doná, G. Kalinganire, C. and Muramutsa, F. (2002) *The Rwandan Experience of foster care for separated children*, Stockholm, Radda Barnen, available as PDF file

children, neighbours, foster children themselves, workers in centres, teachers, and authorities.

3. Before interviewing foster parents, gathering information from neighbours is good, as they may know things about the foster family that the parents may not want to disclose.
4. It is essential to ask the permission of foster parents before interviewing the foster child to avoid that the child is mistreated after the conversation.
5. When presenting the preliminary findings, the advisors recommended the following: to avoid the use of labels for children; to give inheritance equally to foster boys and girls; to put foster children in the identity card; to make all efforts to ensure that children go to school (as a form of inheritance); and to continue to fight for the integration of children in families.
6. They also told us that the report should contain a section on the future of foster children.

In Bangladesh, children were asked to act as advisors in a study on the conditions of children living in families and institutions.³ The same approach was adopted but practical and contextual variations affected the quality of the process. First, the selection of advisors made a difference. Given the difficulty in bringing together representatives of children living in institutions and families, we thought that asking a group of children who attended a street children centre, some living in the community and others residing there, would have been a good compromise. We realised that children were experts about their lives and we learnt more about street life and life in the community than life in institutions. We learnt that the closer the match between advisors and children we want to learn about, the better the outcome. Rather than nominating representatives, all children chose to participate. Sessions were conducted with larger numbers, ranging from 20 to 40, with not all children coming regularly. This reduced the continuity of the 'training' and diluted the increased familiarity and knowledge about the research process and the specific area of investigation. The training sessions were very enjoyable but proved less useful than the ones in Rwanda.

The previous experience of the researchers affected interactions with the children as advisors. The Rwandan researchers were not only experts in research methods but were also experienced in group facilitation and knowledgeable about children in need of protection. Interactions between children and researchers were lively and focussed. In Bangladesh, the co-researchers' strength was technical, as they were trained in conducting research with different groups on various topics. The sessions were somewhat more superficial and less focussed. My position in the two contexts was also different because I had lived in Rwanda for four years prior to leading the foster care study while I had not been in Bangladesh prior to the

³ Doná, G. and Islam, T. (2003) *Overview of the Conditions of Children outside Parental Care in Institutions and Communities*. Unicef: Dhaka, Bangladesh.

beginning of the project. This difference affected the depth of understanding of the issues and had an impact on the trainings and collaboration with co-researchers and children.

Reflecting on these two different research experiences, the need to involve children and adults in planning research projects is becoming more and more vital, given the role that power relations play in the daily lives of refugees, asylum seekers and children in need of protection. The involvement of children as advisors needs to be seen as part of the research strategy and as such acknowledged in the final report. Teaching research methods to children is very interesting and enjoyable, and it gives something back to at least a small number of participants. Needless to say, it enhances the quality of the research itself even when contextual and practical issues influence its outcome.

A network for sharing ideas, lessons learnt and challenges for those conducting research with children is now available under the auspices of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration. For information, please contact Dr. Jill Rutter [j.rutter@unl.ac.uk]

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¹ Dona', G., Kalinganire, C. and Muramutsa, F. (2002) *The Rwandan experience of foster care for separated children*. Stockholm: Save the Children (available on the web)

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(i.e., challenges and successes encountered, interesting information you have learned, advice you may have for students, etc.). If you would like to choose a particular focus within the article, which you believe would be of interest to postgraduates, you are welcome to do so.